

Amanda

(Contains spoilers for the novel Distorted Perceptions)

September 1994.

"Lucy, are you sure there's nothing going on between you and James? You guys have a lot of history."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "James is a friend. That's all he's been for a very long time, Charlotte, as well you know. He's married with two adorable girls, and another kid on the way. And I learned my lesson long ago, about affairs with married men."

The two of them were sitting in a quiet corner of their beloved local, the Red Lion. Such a familiar venue. And, as per usual, Lucy was consuming a pint of Stella, and Charlotte, a medium white wine.

"You mean because of Kev?" ventured Charlotte. "Or Phil?"

"Charlotte!" The expression in her best friend's grey-blue eyes warned Charlotte

not to push the point much further.

Charlotte Lyndhurst and Lucy Ryman, both aged twenty-eight, had known each other since early childhood. In fact, both had known twenty-nine-year-old James McIntyre for almost as long. The three had grown up as neighbours, and attended the same primary and comprehensive schools. Charlotte and Lucy had been in the school year below James, and they had all been friends, even before Lucy and James became childhood sweethearts. To put the case mildly, it had not been her choice to end the relationship, and Lucy had struggled to accept James's first marriage.

"Kev," said Lucy, toying with a strand of her shoulder-length red hair, a nervous gesture that Charlotte associated much more with Lucy's younger sister, Sarah. "I realised in time that me and Phil would have been a huge mistake. And now he and Sarah are getting on much better, and Caleb is beyond excited about becoming a big brother."

Which was true. The birth of Pippa Jackson had been such a blessing to the young couple, whose marriage had been through a bad patch.

"Fair enough," said Charlotte.

Lucy took a decisive swig of Stella Artois. Then: "Listen, Charlie, there was a reason why James asked me to visit, but it wasn't about him and me. In fact, Claudia was there almost the entire time. Anyway, I'm rambling. The fact is, James knows where my cousin is."

Charlotte inhaled deeply. Shit. Lucy referred to Tara Ryman, the only daughter of Lucy's uncle, Mike. This uncle was the younger brother of Lucy's late father, Dave Ryman. Charlotte and Tara had been a couple, and lived together for

years.

"You okay?" enquired Charlotte's friend.

"I'm fine. Just tell me, Luce. I take it she's still with Amanda?"

"Yes, she is. In a sense, that is. They're still in Dorset." Charlotte, Tara, and Lucy had moved to Bournemouth in 1990, where they had stayed for a few years with Tara's friend, Abigail. "They actually only moved as far as Poole."

Charlotte's eyes burned, but she would not cry. She'd done enough of that. "Mike knew, of course."

"He did," admitted Lucy, "but he never told me anything. I heard everything I now know from James." She hesitated. Then: "Charlotte, it was never what we both assumed."

Amanda isn't Tara's girlfriend, never was. She's Amanda Lee, Erica's younger sister."

"Are you sure, Luce?" Charlotte frowned. "I do remember Tara mentioning that Erica had a sister. Apparently, she was at the funeral."

James had been married to Erica, and they had had a daughter, Primrose. Both Erica and Primmy, as well as their second, unborn child, had died in a car crash, which James himself had survived. Before getting together with James, Erica, who had been nine years older than her husband, had lived with her then-girlfriend, Tara.

"Tara was hurt when you wouldn't go with her to the funeral," Lucy reminded her.

"I know. It just didn't feel right. And, even though we didn't break up over it, that was the beginning of the end for us. You saw how we became, once we moved to Abigail's. And Tara and Abigail have history, you know."

Lucy nodded. "I sensed that, but they're not more than friends now. As for

Amanda, she has never been more than a good friend to Tara. Her boyfriend, Oscar, and their son are living there, too. It was never about Tara and Amanda being a couple. It was about the connection with Erica."

Charlotte could feel the sting of determined tears. "Even if that's true, where does it leave me? Tara is in love with her dead ex-girlfriend. That's basically what you're saying, isn't it?"

"It's more complicated than that. Tara is definitely grieving, but she asked James to pass on her contact details. She does love you, Charlie. James wasn't sure what to do, and he's struggled himself, with his marriage to Claudia." Lucy reached into the pocket of her denim jacket. Handed the slip of paper to her friend.

Charlotte's hands shook, as she took the paper, not entirely

knowing whether she should. Not knowing what she planned to do next. She loved Tara Ryman, and always would, but the woman had hurt her more than she had believed possible.

"Thanks, Lucy," said Charlotte, getting to her feet. "I'm going to call it a night, but I'll give you a ring soon. And, if anything happens, you'll be the first to know."